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ABSTRACT

The perception of literary value is a function of the reader's interpretation of literary structures in relation to other creative works in that reader's repertoire and of the "deep structure" of literary imagination within the individual unconscious. This critical model suggests, therefore, that unique experiences with literature and with life determine the framework from which readers make assessments of literary worth. (KS)

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# VALUE AND STRUCTURE: THE SEAMLESS WEB OF LITERARY EXCELLENCE



What is involved in the making of "value judgments?"
What do we mean by the concept "value" as applied to literary texts?
In what sense can the value of a work of literature be said to exist?

In his recent essay "On Value Judgments in the Arts,"[1] critic Elder Olson attempted to unravel the answer to questions of this kind by suggesting that

> We come to the knowledge of values and criteria in art as we do in ethics, by experience; we cannot be taught them [directly] as we are taught theorems in mathematics. Out of repeated experiences we come to form the concept of a standard, as out of repeated experiences of the particular we frame the notion of the universal. [Thus, for example,] we can be taught that Shakespeare is great; we must teach ourselves the greatness of Shakespeare.[2]

Olson's answer implies that the "value" of a literary text must not be a discernible property of a work itself, but rather must exist as a certain relation between a work--its real or supposed properties--and other literary texts one has experienced.[3] "Value" from this point of view becomes a relative and subjective matter, a closed system wherein the worth of an individual text is determined by comparison of that text with remembered texts whose features are retained within the mind, each associated with greater or lesser degrees of insight and delight.

Pursuing Olson's observation, one is compelled to ask "But in what sense do literary texts continue to exist within the memory and on what basis do the acts of comparison our critic finds central to the assessment of value take place?" Elsewhere in his essay, Olson attempts to address this question by observing that before one can determine the value of a literary work, it must have been perceived and interpreted or otherwise "fixed" within the mind.

> ...a work of art is a structuring of sensory materials into some form perceptible to sense, and this perceptible form is itself the basis or material for the construction of what I shall call a mental or conceptual form.... Starting with the data, the perceiver will through various mental processes build up in his mind a concept of the form of the work with such substructures as it may contain. These processes will of course include imagination and emotion; they will also, however, involve opinion,

> and each opinion will be based upon preceding opinions ...each [constituting] a hypothesis, and all enter into the compound hypothesis as to the form, which derives its probability from its constituents as a compound proposition derives its truth or probability from the truth or probability of its constituent propositions.[4]

Olson's answer suggests that when a work is "fixed in the mind," it is fixed holistically rather than fragmentarily--that is, it is grasped as a whole rather than as select parts. Olson continues

> In all of the temporal arts, for example, the parts of the whole exist at different times, and unless the earlier were retained in memory--for they have ceased to be--the whole would never be grasped.... [As] in every act of production the artist takes sensible materials and structures them into supra-sensible relations which constitute the form of the work, [sc] in every act of apperception we grasp some (or possibly all) of these relations [which] eventually constitute our perception of the work.[5]

Thus, according to Olson, the mind retains what it has read as a completed form or structure composed of sub-structures linked in fluid interrelationship.

It is unfortunately this moment of transformation of the myriad possibilities for interpretation implicit in a literary text into a single structure comprised of a tissue of relationships retained within the mind which seems to defy explanation, perpetually shrouded as it is in the mystery of unconscious mental processes. Through these processes the vast and awesome overabundance of art is reduced to manageable proportions. Reduction of a literary text to a tissue of relationships, what I would call a structure and I believe what Olson calls conceptual form is abstractive and symbolic in nature. Episode and element are codified and thrown together in classes and groups; subtle or minute distinctions are glossed over to get to essences; complexities are transformed into simplicities by selecting main features, principle aspects, dominant traits.[6] In this way, the experience of reading is rendered into paralanguage, into the conventions of language-use with all the simplification of complexities such rendering entails.

In response to the question "In what way are one's reading experiences retained within the mind?" then, I have proposed that it is these reductive structural patterns which

constitute an individual's bank of experience with literature. I believe a case can be made for the actual existence of these patterns within the mind and would cite continued interest in genre theory as one sort of evidence of such existence. Yet, I am more interested here in what the mind does with these structural patterns subsequent to the acts of reading and interpretation. For I believe it is these patterns which when juxtaposed with one another and united through the agency of cognitive processes of comparison that go to make up that "deep structure" of literature which Olson terms the "standard" against which value judgments are made. And it is also perhaps, just perhaps, this fusion of the structures of unique particulars which constitutes what other theorists have called "archetypes," the "collective unconscious," and perhaps still others, "myths." For it is along this edge of abstracted pattern that literary artifact, linguistic structure, social ritual--or pattern imposed on life--and belief--pattern abstracted from experience with life itself--begin to converge.

Poet Robert Graves and critic Northrup Frye, addressing the question of the nature of the existence of such mental superstructures (narrative categories of literature broader than ordinary literary genres) from entirely different perspectives, have managed to demonstrate that such structures do indeed exist. To Graves, they are "true myths"--representatives of a sort of narrative shorthand or linguistic code for a ritual mime or dramatic performance which itself has encoded a particular tribe's, clan's or nation's system of beliefs drawn from life experience.[7] For Frye, on the other hand, myth is a function of literary design at its most abstract and The Anatomy of Criticism and his more recent book, The Secular Scripture, abundantly demonstrate the nature of the four great mythic structures he has identified--comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire--together with the multitude of transformations these "deep structures" (to borrow a useful terminology) can undergo to emerge as the "surface" structural patterns of individual literary texts.

In the model of the critical process I am attempting to outline here, the "myth" of Graves with its link to belief and to social life, the "myth" of Frye with its roots in thousands of individual texts in both the traditions of art and consumed art, and the "standard" of Olson, built up from one's personal experience with particular texts, are held in common correspondence within the memory of each reader. It is to this "deep structure," at once both personal and public, that I would suggest each reader appeals when he makes a value judgment whether that judgment be simple, compound or comparative in nature.[8] The reader interprets and resolves what he has read into a linguistic

structure which in turn is aligned in what probably amounts to a binary match-no match process with the "deep structure" of literary memory. A match and the literary artifact in question is evaluated as satisfying; no-match and it is held unsatisfactory. Thus, the model of critical processes I would here advance can be reduced to language as follows: perception of literary value is a correlative function of perception of literary structure and of transformation and comparison of the structure of one unique particular text with another and with the deep structure of literary imagination within the unconscious.

An effective model to be effective, however, must exert explanatory power in solving problems related to its nature. I believe this model of the critical process does suggest some such interesting lines of inquiry. For example, the model helps to explain something of the curious nature of literary evaluation where expressions of comparative value seem so alike at times to statements of personal faith or belief. As we have discovered, the criteria for value assessment and propositions of belief appear to be parts of one interlocking mental system.

The model suggests how that many lines of judgment and interpretation can be drawn from a single text, for each is influenced by personal experience both with art and with life as well as by linguistic facility. As Olson suggests,

> The greater the complexity [of a work of art], the greater the number of structures it is likely to contain and the more difficult it becomes to keep from mistaking one of these for the final structure, that is, the <u>form</u> of the work.[9]

The model further suggests something of the way value exists both objectively and subjectively at the same time. Value emerges as a consequence of experience and therefore is subjective in nature; yet, the sensible form of a literary work must be accurately perceived and correctly interpreted, its suprasensible substructures grasped in "their totality and in the totality of their relations as constituting the final subsumptive whole which is the form of the work"[10] and such operations are dependent on the existence of an object text. So too, in this way, the model suggests something of the relation of value to taste, the unique manner or style by which the individual mind pieces together information about particular works of literature.

The model outlines something about what the conditions of sound judgment may be. The image of the man or woman of broad experience both with literature and with life and possessed of the gift of language facility comes quickly to mind. And certainly these have been the characteristics of our finest critics in the past.

Finally, at best, the model suggests why Dr. Olson is so right in concluding his essay with the following observation:

> ...we come to know the Summum Bonum in each art as we do the Summum Bonum in life. We come to know more about art as we come to know more about life, and we begin to realize its true importance only when we realize that, important as art is, it would not be so important if other things were not more important.[11]

Linguistic structure and the synthesizing faculty of memory--these then are the warp and woof to the seamless web that constitutes our perception of excellence in literature and perhaps the shape of our belief as well.

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NOTES

1 Elder Olson, On Value Judgments in the Arts (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 307-26..
2 Ibid., 325.
3 Ibid., 309. This is really a paraphrase of Olson's original expression.
4 Ibid., 312-3.
5 Ibid., 311.
6 James E. Miller, Jr., Word, Self, Reality: A Rhetoric of Imagination (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1973), 34-5. It is Dr. Miller's understanding that "However we 'interpret' [any] experience, it must finally be in language."
7 Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (London: Pelican-Penguin Books, 1972), introduction to volume 1.
8 In Olson's terminology, a simple value judgment is represented by the statement, for example: "Yeats's image here is good;" a compound value judgment by "Yeats's imagery is good;" and a comparative value judgment by the expression, "Yeats's poetry is better than Keats's." See his work cited, pp.321-5.
9 Olson, op. cit., 312.
10 Ibid., 318-9.
11 Ibid., 326.